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ABSTRACT

It was the purpose of this study to investigate possible ways that the University of Maryland, and particularly the student personnel and counseling staffs, could help students cope with the area of death and dying. Twenty-eight volunteer subjects from an introductory psychology class who had experienced the death of someone close to them completed the questionnaire anonymously. Students reported most often on their reactions to the deaths of grandparents (32%) and fathers (21%). Sixty-one percent reported the death as unexpected. Eighteen percent said their functioning was seriously affected for a few days, 25% said 1 to 4 weeks, 4% said up to 1 year, and 2.1% reported more than 2 years of impaired functioning. Forty-six percent mentioned that talking with friends was vitally important to them, and 23% said that regular activities helped them. Subjects reported that it would have been helpful if friends had not avoided the subject of death (21%), and suggested more courses or other University resources on dealing with the problems of death (14%). (Author)

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GRIEF REACTIONS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Research Report # 5-72

Anne M. Collins and William E. Sedlacek

Summary

Death and dying are taboo matters in contemporary American life. The irony of this fact is that death is an event which crosses all economic, social, educational and cultural lines. Eventually every person deals with death - if not through grief for the death of loved ones, then through facing one's own death. College students do not escape these problems since 21% of the people in the United States lose one parent before they are 19. It was the purpose of this study to investigate possible ways that the University, and particularly, the student personnel and counseling staffs, could help students in this area. Twenty-eight volunteer subjects from an introductory psychology class who had experienced the death of someone close to them completed a questionnaire anonymously. Students reported most often on their reactions to the deaths of grandparents (32%) and fathers (21%). 61% reported the death as unexpected. 18% said their functioning was seriously affected for a few days, 25% said one to four weeks, 4% said up to one year and 21% reported more than 2 years of impaired functioning. 46% mentioned that talking with friends was vitally important to them, and 23% said regular activities helped them. Subjects reported that it would have been helpful if friends had not avoided the subject of death (21%), and suggested more courses or other University resources on dealing with problems of death (14%). Results were discussed in terms of previous literature and providing training programs for those working with students.

Death and dying are taboo matters in contemporary American life. The irony of this fact is that death is an event which crosses all economic, social, educational and cultural lines. Eventually, every person deals with death- if not through grief for the death of loved ones, then through facing one's own death.

Despite the inevitability of death, Amercians typically try to deny its reality and power (Scott and Brewer, 1971). In an analysis of cultural values and attitudes toward death, Howard and Scott (1971) note that death implies a defeat of man by nature, separation, and a state of inactivity. They point out that all of these points run counter to American culture. Americans believe man can master nature, they dread social isolation and use it as a form of childhood punishment, and Americans place a high value on activity for its own sake (Howard and Scott, 1971). In light of these cultural values, perhaps it is not surprising that Americans do avoid giving attention to death and bereavment unless virtually forced to do so.

Understandable as this avoiding attitude is, however, it has several unfortunate consequences. Many studies (Kutscher, 1969; Kubler-Ross, 1970; Davidson, 1961; Berg and Cohen, 1959; Hilgard, Newman and Fisk, 1960) indicate that severe emotional problems can result from unresolved grief. It is theorized that many unhealthy grief reactions are exacerbated by the lack of societal support for and understanding of the bereaved person (Paul, 1969). Since Americans avoid thinking about or having contact with death or dying, they are often overwhelmed by the need to cope with powerful and often frighteneing emotions which are evoked by the death of a loved one. Their friends and associates who might usually offer help and support in a crisis are often equally confused by the mourner's confusion, anger, and depression (Bowlby, 1961; Jackson, 1971; Parkes, 1965). Inadvertently, well-meaning friends may even encourage the mourner to deny his grief reactions, to "forget the past," or to "keep a stiff upper lip." This kind of denial almost

always leads to a delay and prolongation of bereavment, to more troublesome and inappropriate behavior toward others, and, in extreme cases, to mental illness (Parkes, 1965; Bowlby, 1961; Paul, 1969; Rosell, 1969; and Blank, 1969). Bowlby (1961) describes a four-stage model of normal grief reactions which is widely cited in the literature on mourning. He sees the mourner as first denying the reality of the death, then being angry and making attempts to recover the lost person in some way. The third phase is characterized by general disorganization, in which the mourner's hope of reunion is fading and is being replaced with feelings of restlessness, depression, fright, loss of self esteem and hopelessness. Bowlby sees this as the crucial stage of mourning and asserts that if this stage is not thoroughly worked through, the mourner may never complete his grieving. When this stage is fully experienced, the mourner has decathected the loved person and enters into the fourth phase in which he reorganizes his world and begins to form new ties and relationships. Virtually all the literature on mourning and bereavment stresses the importance of completing these stages, and many authors note that incomplete grieving can affect a person's functioning for limitless periods of time. Gorer (1965) emphasizes this point and notes that this must be done despite the lack of societal support for mourning. He stresses the importance of family solidarity in this effort, and urges parents to include their children more fully in the mourning process. He notes that the family's attitude toward mourning is particularly crucial because societal norms discourage healthy grief reactions and, therefore, the mourner is often in need of family support for his efforts to work through his grief.

College students do not escape these problems. They are products of the same culture as other Americans and they experience serious difficulties in working through their reactions to the death of persons close to them. Neither is the death of a loved one an uncommon event in the life of college students. One

estimate of the frequency of parental death found that 21% of people in the United States lose one parent before the age of 19. In addition to the death of parents and grandparents, members of the college-age group often experience the loss of friends, rommates, siblings and lovers through death in Vietnam and death in automobile accidents.

Despite the fact that we can estimate that many students do experience serious problems in dealing with their grief reactions, almost nothing in the university campus environment acknowledges this or offers the student any support or assistance during this crisis. The present study was an attempt to investigate possible ways that the institution, and particularly the student personnel and counseling staffs, could provide some help.

Method

Subjects: The subjects were volunteers (N=28) from an introductory psychology class at the University of Maryland and represented about 10% of the class. They ranged in age from 18 to 31, and their mean age was 21. The subjects were asked to fill out the questionnaire only if they had experienced the death of someone close to them and were willing to discuss their feelings and reactions to that event. All responses used in the study were anonymous.

Instruments: The instrument used was a 15 item questionnaire constructed for the study. The questionnaire was developed in two stages: a pilot instrument was tested on 12 graduate students and university staff members who had experienced the deaths of someone close to them. After examining their responses and comments on the instrument, revisions were made and the final questionnaire developed. The final instrument differed from the pilot in that the final form had more open-ended items and fewer closed, forced choice responses. The questionnaire contained seven structured response items and eight open-ended items.

Procedure: The structured questionnaire responses were reported as frequencies and percentages while the open ended responses were content analyzed. The content analysis categories were tested by having two independent raters categorize a sample of the questionnaires using the categories. The inter-rater agreement was computed and those categories which did not achieve 80% agreement were discarded and new categories were developed. In this way, some reliability was found for the response categories. Once the categories were developed, questionnaire responses were reported as frequencies and percentages.

Results

Students reported on their reactions to the deaths of grandparents (32%), fathers (21%), friends (18%), other relatives (14%), sisters (7%), brothers (4%) and mothers (4%)*. The sample reported that these people had been very important (64%), important (29%), or somewhat important (7%) to them, and none of the subjects reported that the deceased was only slightly important or not important to them.

The amount of time which had elapsed between the death and the response to the questionnaire varied widely, with a mean of 3.6 years and a range of 15 years to 3 weeks. Sixty-one percent of the sample said the death was unexpected, while 39% said they had had some warning. Only 2 of the subjects (7%) said they were present when the person died, while 26 (93%) were not. This supports the contention of many writers that death is becoming more and more unfamiliar to the average person, and that many people have never actually witnessed death except in movies, on stage and on the evening news.

Thirty-two percent of the sample shared a home with the deceased at the time of the death, and 68% did not. Of the latter group, many noted that they had shared a home with the person at some time or that the person had left the home for a hospital before the death occurred. Eighteen percent said their functioning was seriously affected for a few days after the death, 25% said one to four weeks,

*Percentages reported do not always add to 100 due to rounding.

4% said up to one year and 21% said more than two years. 32% said they could not estimate how long they were affected.

Three questions on the instrument focused on the funeral/burial services held in connection with the death. The questions revolved around what the services were like, whether they were helpful to the respondent and whether or not the subject would have liked them to be different in some way. Responses to these questions proved the hardest to categorize since subjects expressed somewhat ambiguous and contradictory sentiments with regard to the services. Fifty-four percent of the respondents said the services included traditional funeral/burial rituals, an additional 21% said the services were traditional with many people attending, and 11% said traditional services were held with only family and close friends present. Fourteen percent said they couldn't describe the services because they either hadn't attended or they found the question too vague. Eighteen percent found the services meaningful and helpful, 7% found them helpful in that they stressed the reality of the death, 18% found the services were not helpful because of the offensive or hypocritical behavior of other mourners, and 39% said the services were not helpful, depressing or sad. Twenty-one percent could not decide or could not respond because they didn't attend.

Sixteen (57%) of the subjects said they would change the services in some way, 21% said they wouldn't change them and 21% could not respond. Of those who said they would change the funeral/burial services, four said they would limit them to family and close friends and six said they would make the services shorter, simpler and more personal.

In talking about their immediate reactions to the death, subjects cited many different feelings. Sadness and depression were the two feelings named most frequently, with anger, loneliness and confusion also being mentioned several times. Other reactions mentioned were shock, surprise, numbness, guilt, fear, and "no

reaction." Later reactions followed the same trend. Sadness was mentioned most often, followed by guilt, regret that the person was gone, anger, depression, and introspection about the person, the meaning of death and about trying to truly believe that the person was dead. Other feelings reported by the subjects were fear, loneliness, and confusion.

When asked what helped them cope with their feelings, 46% mentioned talking with friends as vitally important to them. Other things which subjects felt helped them were regular activities (23%), thinking about the meaning of death (12%), remembering the person (12%), helping other mourners (4%), and 4% reported that nothing was helpful to them at this time. When asked what they thought would have helped them, subjects said it would have been helpful if friends had not avoided the subject of death (21%), if they had been able to return to regular activities (21%), and if more help were available from community or university resources on dealing with the problems surrounding the death (14%). They also mentioned courses on death at the university (14%), and understanding more about why the death had occurred (7%). Twenty-one percent did not feel anything would really have helped them cope with the experience.

The final item asked subjects how prepared they felt they were to cope with the experience. Fifty percent felt they were unprepared for the experience, 39% said they were prepared and 11% said they really didn't know.

Discussion

In a study of this type, the data to some extent speak for themselves. However, some particular points do seem important to look at in more detail. In viewing the data from the structured responses, it is interesting to note the number of subjects who reported on the death of a friend or brother or sister. Many times one thinks of death as an event occurring almost exclusively in connection with old people. The results of this study, however, as well as consideration

of traffic and combat deaths, serve as a reminder that many young people die and that their deaths can be especially traumatic for the peers they leave behind.

Another striking point was the amount of grief subjects felt for grandparents and other older relatives who had died some years earlier. Perhaps surprisingly these deaths seemed to affect the subjects almost as strongly as the death of parents or friends and the grief reactions reported by the subjects lasted for much longer than some literature would predict. Perhaps the crucial point here is that the subjects, being relatively young, were reporting on their reactions not only to the particular death of the person, but also their reactions to the first acquaintance they had with death. In many instances, subjects said the death stimulated the first thoughts they had ever entertained about their own mortality and about what death really means. In thinking about this, it does seem that grief reactions in many college students may often be more serious because of the novelty and strangeness of the experience. In that sense, they may need more support and help than older mourners who have had some experience with death and bereavment.

Another result of the study which seems to reiterate the strangeness of the experience to the subjects was the fact that so few were present when the person died. In earlier times, death was not so unfamiliar and people died at home in the presence of family and friends. Now, 60% of Americans die in hospitals and death takes on a more distant and frightening cast because of the unfamiliarity of it. Indeed, some thanatologists believe that American interest in death and violence in movies and other entertainment media is enhanced by the fact that death is such a foreign and strange experience in people's everyday lives.

Another interesting aspect of the results is the listing of friends as the crucial source of support in coping with grief. Friends were the most frequent source of help reported and friends' tendency to avoid the subject of the death

was also the most frequently noted change that subjects wanted to make. Forty-six percent of the subjects said talking to friends was the most important source of help they found, and in talking about what would have helped, 21% said it would have helped them if friends had not avoided the topic of death. This seems to indicate that friends, rather than family or religion, were vitally important to the mourners, and it is somewhat frightening, therefore, to contemplate what a death experience is like for the many college students who have few good friends on their campus. On a large university campus, it is almost taken for granted that many students will have difficulty making friends and meeting people, and loneliness is often reported as one of the chief emotional problems of college students. It is difficult to imagine what such students do to cope with their grief when friends are not available.

Another point brought out by the data was the fact that subjects saw a need for more support from the university environment in the form of courses on death and "people to talk to" about the many problems and fears associated with grief, especially when it is the first time a person has encountered the experience. Death education courses are still in the pioneer stage, but the results of this study support the need for such courses. Additionally, there is likely little, if any, such content given in most counselor or student personnel training programs. Many subjects felt that they would not have been so distressed by the experience if they had ever given any thought to death or if they could have found any way to integrate what was happening to them into a larger body of knowledge or understanding. One particular problem mentioned in this context was the fear of personal death which often followed the death of someone close to them for some subjects. Many felt confused by this fear and two said they were greatly relieved to discover through talking and reading that this fear was a common one and that they were not unbalanced.

While some of the results were expected, it was perhaps surprising that students seemed apologetic about the anger they had felt. Also, they reported that some of their reactions were so unexpected that they were not sure they were "normal" and therefore they had to deal with their fear of losing their sanity as well as their grief for the person who had died. This seems to be particularly sad, since most mourners have enough to deal with without also feeling guilty about what they are experiencing. This sentiment seems to echo Gorer's (1965) comments about the lack of support for mourning and the fact that society encourages mourners to deny their feelings and to see their grief reactions as inappropriate. Certainly, a university community could be a place where some of these unhealthy societal norms are replaced with understanding of grief and acceptance of the inevitability of death instead of denial of it.

In summary, it seems that the results of the study support the idea of having courses on death education and also of increasing the total community's sensitivity to and awareness of death and grief reactions. One particular evidence of this was the eagerness of subjects to respond to the questionnaire. While only about one tenth of the students in the class took the questionnaire, many expressed interest in it, and those who did take part in the study spent considerable time on their responses. Many also commented at length to the researcher and expressed strong appreciation that some attention was being given to an experience which had been crucial for them and about which they could find little information.

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